

# HEAD HEAD

## Cowboys could make deep tourney run



EMILIO RIVERA  
THE COLLEGIAN

After a controversy-filled and disappointing regular season, Oklahoma State (21-12, 8-10 Big 12) seems to be getting hot at the right time to make a deep run into the NCAA tournament.

The Cowboys, after being widely projected to share the Big 12 title with Kansas before the season started, began conference play going a pathetic 4-9, a mark that failed in comparison to the hype they had received. Then midway through conference play, the Cowboys were in the news for something even more disturbing: star sophomore guard Marcus Smart pushed a fan during a physical altercation that garnered him a three-game suspension.

The good news for Travis Ford's Cowboys team is that they are in the midst of their best performance of the season. The Cowboys are 5-2 since Smart has returned from suspension. Their two losses came at then No. 16 Iowa State in overtime and last night against No. 10 Kansas.

Most of the recent success can be drawn, oddly enough, from the three-game span of Smart's suspension. Even while his team lost by a small-margin of six points per game, including a six point overtime loss to Baylor, Ford's team learned to play without their star guard. Now with Smart back, Ford's team is a much better rounded program that is capable of playing without Smart in key situations.

Defense had been a crutch in this down season for the Cowboys. Ford's team is first in the Big 12 in steals, averaging 7.5 per game, while being ranked 13th in the nation turnover margin of 3.5 per game. With 75 steals on the season, Smart is ranked fifth in the nation in steals per game, propelling his team on the defensive end and making life hard for opposing ball-handlers.

Another stat that shows the Cowboys' talent is their scoring margin of 11.6 points per game despite their 12-losses. They are ranked 17th in the nation in scoring margin, showing that they can run away with a game against any team, and have posted 16 victories by double-digits. Ford and the Cowboys might also have the most underrated senior in the Big 12, guard Markel Brown. Brown averages 17.3 points per game, only .6 less than Smart. Brown has averaged in double-digits in three straight seasons. Playing 35.1 minutes per game, Brown has become a constant for the Cowboys and could propel them in the tournament even when Smart is not out on the floor.

To add even more depth to this group, sophomore guard Phil Forte III ranks sixth in the nation in 3-point percentage, draining 45.2 percent of his shots from behind the arc. Forte can be the spark to start any run for the Cowboys.

It is Brown and Forte, when added with the superstar qualities of Smart, that puts the Cowboys ahead of all of the other Big 12 programs and could push them further in the tournament.

If the Cowboys can figure out how to use what they have learned throughout their turbulent season, they could end up being a bracket buster. Failing to live up to the hype that they were given to start the season, the Cowboys could use their fire to make a deep run in the tournament behind Smart and Brown.

Don't count the Cowboys out just because of their slow start. Their recent surge has them in perfect position to manifest their lofty preseason rankings.

Emilio Rivera is a freshman in pre-journalism and mass communications. Please send all comments to [sports@kstatecollegian.com](mailto:sports@kstatecollegian.com).

## Cyclones potential bracket surprise



AUSTIN EARL  
THE COLLEGIAN

The Iowa State Cyclones have a chance to do big things in the NCAA Tournament. With a roster filled with talent and experience, coupled with smart coaching, it's no surprise that Iowa State has played

as well as they have this year; don't be shocked if their play continues to dazzle during March Madness.

One reason for the Cyclones' potential success is their senior leader, Melvin Ejim. Named the Big 12 Player of the Year, and Iowa State's leading scorer, Ejim has averaged 18.2 points per game and pulled down 8.6 rebounds per game. Ejim has played significant minutes in four NCAA tournament games already, and won two of them. Pre-game jitters should not be an issue for someone with that much experience and when a team's best player is ready to go from the opening tip, it could be the end of the road for their opponent.

Ejim is not the only upperclassman for the Cyclones that contributes on the scoreboard, however. Senior guard DeAndre Kane is a great player as well. Kane is playing his only year at Iowa State, but he is making the most of it. He is a First-Team All-Big 12 shooting guard who has averaged 17.1 points, 6.7 rebounds, and 5.9 assists per game.

The duo of Kane and Ejim is almost impossible to stop. As if they aren't enough, sophomore forward Georges Niang can also score for the Cyclones averaging 16.2 points per game. In Iowa State's final eight games, Niang scored less than 10 points just twice, with both games ending in defeat for the Cyclones. Getting Niang going is vital for his team's success.

Iowa State's big three may be great scorers, but it's the little things for the Cyclones that help them excel. Coach Fred Hoiberg draws up plays in key situations that get his team quick baskets. In tight NCAA tournament games, those few points scored in quick succession just before halftime or coming out of timeouts can be the difference between winning and losing.

Despite not having a player taller than 6 foot 9 inches, the Cyclones have controlled the boards. They are 19th in the country, and second in the Big 12, in rebounds per game and lead the country in defensive rebounds per game. Controlling the defensive glass takes away second chance points from the teams you face.

Last year's national champion, the Louisville Cardinals, shared some characteristics with this season's Iowa State team. The Cardinals ranked highly in rebounding and scoring, just like the Cyclones do. In fact, Iowa State ranks higher in both categories than the Cardinals did last year.

Where the comparison between Louisville and Iowa State splits apart is defense. ISU gives up 73.9 points per game, ranking them 279th in the country. They must find a way to shore up that aspect of their game to move far into the tournament.

Iowa State has a lot of great things going for them. They have faltered at times this season, but if they play their best basketball in each of their NCAA Tournament games, they could make a deep run. Keeping teams off the glass, scoring at a high clip, and Hoiberg's coaching prowess could propel the Cyclones into a team that is playing into the month of April.

Austin Earl is a freshman in pre-journalism and mass communications. Please send all comments to [sports@kstatecollegian.com](mailto:sports@kstatecollegian.com).



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Oklahoma State guard **Marcus Smart** pushes past Kansas freshman guard **Wayne Selden** on Thursday at the Sprint Center during the first round of the Phillips 66 Big 12 Championship tournament. After defeating Oklahoma State KU will play Iowa State in the third round.

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## NCAA Tournament could feature possible Cats-Shockers in-state bout

By JOHN ZETMEIR  
THE COLLEGIAN

Wichita State has shocked the country this season, entering the NCAA tournament with a perfect record. With selection Sunday only a few days away, the state of Kansas is likely to put three teams in the NCAA tournament. The possibility of an in-state square off between the three Kansas schools, fans in the state of Kansas should be more excited than ever for March Madness.

This season, the Wildcats of K-State and Jayhawks of Kansas split their regular season series. Would a game three between the two schools be entertaining? Sure, but this is isn't an uncommon matchup. Something that Kansas fans don't get to see ever year would be a matchup between the Shockers and Wildcats. The Shockers will likely get a No. 1 seed for the NCAA tournament, if they do and it's in the midwest, we could be in store for a Kansas matchup. The Wildcats have been projected to get anywhere from an eight to a 10 seed

in the tournament. If these two fall in the same region, a third round matchup would look very possible. Of course, both of the teams would have to win at least one game before playing each other.

Hypothetically, if the Wildcats do nab the No. 8 seed in the midwest with the Shockers getting their top seed in the same region, how can fans vote against the potential matchup? Not only would this likely be an exciting game for the fans, but good for the state of Kansas. How would the Shockers handle a player like freshman guard Marcus Foster from K-State who has found success scoring against the top competition in the Big 12? Could the Wildcats handle the craftiness of Shocker sophomore point guard Fred VanVleet? These questions can only be answered if the two can find a way to square off.

The matchup that nearly every basketball fan in the Sunflower state wants is the Jayhawks and Shockers. Kansas has been a blue-blood basketball program in the country for much of its existence, but for once, they have not been the highest ranked

team from the state this season.

If the Shockers and Jayhawks played, I believe that Wichita State would feel the most pressure. The Shockers have only played three teams this season that rank in the top-50 in RPI. The Jayhawks have 13 games against top-50 RPI opponents and will likely add more before the Big 12 conference ends. Kansas would be the best team the Shockers have played all season and it wouldn't even be close. To add to the excitement, both teams have a player with the last name of Wiggins and yes, they are brothers. Younger brother Andrew has been the Jayhawks leading scorer and is being touted as a potential No. 1 pick in the upcoming NBA draft. Senior Nick Wiggins at Wichita State does not have the resume of his younger brother, but hey, would you want to lose to your younger brother?

Barring something stunning occurring on selection sunday, all three of these teams are a lock for the NCAA tournament. Now we'll see if the selection committee puts them in a situation to play each other.

EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Freshman forward **Wesley Iwundu** takes aim over an Iowa State defender on Thursday at the Sprint Center. The Wildcats fell 91-85 in the second round of the Phillips 66 Big 12 Championship tournament.





## By the Numbers

By SPENCER LOW  
THE COLLEGIAN

1

K-State had the top scoring defense and 3-point defense in the Big 12 during the regular season. The Wildcats may not put up huge numbers on offense, but their defense has been stingy all year, something that head coach Bruce Weber can hang his hat on. As the famous line goes, offense wins games but defense wins championships. The Wildcats are hoping this will prove true.

5

Number of wins away from Bramlage Coliseum this season for K-State. The Wildcats dominated at home this year, but struggled mightily on the road, especially once league play started, winning just two away games against Big 12 opponents. The Wildcats will need to find a way to get wins away from home in the NCAA Tournament or else they will be watching most of the action from home.

21

Freshman Marcus Foster's points scored against



EMILY DeSHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Senior **Will Spradling** brings the ball up the court against Iowa State on Thursday at the Sprint Center.

Iowa State in the Big 12 Tournament. Despite an opening round loss, Foster did what he does best in putting the ball through the hoop against the Cyclones on Thursday, and he will need to remain hot in the NCAA Tournament. Some freshman shy away from the spotlight in big games, but Foster shines. Look for him to continue to score buckets in bunches in the tournament.

65.6

K-State's free throw percentage in the regular season. Watching K-State struggle at the line is nothing new for Wildcat fans, but the team will need to tighten it up at the charity stripe in March Madness. Free throws can make a huge impact in games, especially on the biggest stages. K-State finished last in the Big 12 free throw percentage in the regular season and will need to focus on this aspect of their game when the tournament starts.

1021

Career points by senior guard Will Spradling. K-State is going to need senior leadership in the tournament, and Spradling has been the glue that holds the team together this season. He plays at either guard spot and can defend multiple positions. Spradling will have to step up if this team wants to make any type of run this March.

## Big 12 champs more than worthy of No. 1 seed in postseason play

By DAVID EMBERS  
THE COLLEGIAN

I don't necessarily agree with it, but the near unanimous prediction from analysts across the country is that Arizona, Wichita State and Florida are locks for No. 1 seeds in the upcoming NCAA tournament. That leaves just one top seed left. Based on their entire body of work, and way the selection committee has selected in the past, I believe Kansas will be awarded the final No. 1 spot.

With an eight-point loss to West Virginia on March 8, the Jayhawks significantly hurt their chances of being a No. 1 seed. However, an impressive win against Oklahoma State on Thursday afternoon, and an early exit from the Big East tournament by Villanova, has KU back on track. The 24-8 record doesn't scream dominance, but Bill Self and company played, by far, the most difficult schedule in the country. The Jayhawks played Duke, Florida, New Mexico and San Diego State all before the conference schedule started. In addition, KU plays in the toughest conference in the country, and sealed a Big 12 championship with three games left to play.

Duke, Wisconsin and Syracuse have all put together impressive seasons. All three will finish in the Top 10 in RPI, and have played formidable competition the entire year. Had any of those three teams won their conference, I would feel more confident about handing them the final top spot. Instead, we probably have five or six legitimate two

seeds, but no separation on who should be bumped up to the top slot.

Fans like to argue seeding leading up to Selection Sunday, but the truth of the matter is that being a No. 2 seed or being a No. 1 seed doesn't matter that much. In fact, Bill Self has been quoted as saying he would rather play closer to Lawrence and be a No. 2 seed, than be awarded a top seed and be sent to the East or West coast. With the way KU travels, I can totally understand Self preferring to stay close to home; any home court advantage you can gain while in the tournament is huge.

In the end, it probably doesn't matter that much. There is a sense of pride when you are awarded a top seed, but beyond that, there isn't much benefit. Even still, the selection committee should reward the Jayhawks for challenging themselves in non-conference play. Send a statement to the rest of the country that playing cupcakes (cough-cough Wichita State) during the non-conference is not acceptable. In my mind, the Jayhawks have done enough to garner the top spot. There were certainly some bumps along the way, and their record isn't amazing, but when you step back and look at their entire body of work, KU has done enough to earn the final No. 1 seed.

David Embers is a junior in biology. Please send all comments to [sports@kstatecollegian.com](mailto:sports@kstatecollegian.com).

EMILY DeSHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Kansas freshman guard **Andrew Wiggins** dribbles around Oklahoma State sophomore **Marcus Smart** during the second round of the Big 12 Championship tournament Thursday.



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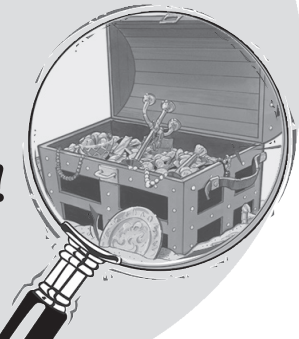
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